

A Year in the Life by jeeno2

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A Year in the Life

i.

December 19, 1984

The minute Mike walks into his living room and sees the fresh sprigs of mistletoe hanging everywhere he has a sudden and complete change of heart about tonight's plans.

"No," he says flatly. "Absolutely not." He turns to face his friends. "This was a terrible idea."

To his annoyance, no one else looks nearly as horrified as he feels.

Dustin, in fact, just rolls his eyes. "Mike, you promised," he points out. "You promised Nancy and Jonathan you'd come to their dumb party. And then the five of us made a pact to come to their dumb party together."

Mike swallows, feeling suddenly like all the oxygen's been sucked out of the room. "I don't really care about any of that right now."

Will laughs, and then claps him on the shoulder. "It won't bite you, you know."

Mike turns to face his best friend, who's wearing the nicest sweater he's ever seen him in. The Byers don't have much, but Joyce spares no expense for her boys at Christmas.

"What won't bite me?" he asks.

Will raises an eyebrow. "The mistletoe, dummy." He points over Mike's shoulder, in the general direction of the living room. "You know. The stuff you've been glaring at ever since we got here."

Mike can feel his face grow hot at the accusation. "You don't know it won't bite me," he mutters.

Because he doesn't. He can't. Will may have faced the Upside Down, twice, and lived to tell the tale. But not even Will Byers has been to

once of Nancy's Christmas parties before.

He has no idea what they're in for. None of his friends do.

Now it's Max's turn to roll her eyes. "It's just mistletoe," she says, shrugging. Mike doesn't fail to notice how Lucas' face goes a little green at her words. That makes him feel a bit better. Vindicated, somehow. "Just, you know. Stay away from it if you don't want to get kissed."

But it isn't that Mike doesn't want to get kissed. That's not it at all. He *does* want to be kissed. He wants that more, in fact, than he's ready to admit to himself. But the only person he wants to kiss is still in hiding at Hopper's trailer. *For her own safety*, Hopper tells him, every time Mike demands to know how much longer all of this will go on.

The last thing Mike needs right now is yet another reminder of the Snow Ball, of that one kiss they did share, and of just how badly he misses her.

He says none of this to his friends.

"Um. Well, Nancy's sneaky," he says instead. "She'll spring the stuff on you before you realize she's done it." It's a bald-faced lie, of course. Nancy would never do any such thing. But maligning Nancy like this makes him feel better so he decides to just run with it.

Dustin puts an arm around his shoulder and gives him a nod full of fake sympathy. "I'll protect you, Mike," he says solemnly, making everyone else laugh.

In the end, Mike does join the party, but only because he doesn't want to catch grief about it later on. But no matter what his friends say he stubbornly refuses to have any fun.

ii.

March 15, 1985

He thinks he can tell when El's visiting him.

He can't see her, of course. Not really. But when she comes to him at night (and it's always at night, according to her letters; she waits until after Hopper's gone to bed so she can have the TV all to herself) he thinks he can feel a kind of presence or... or *something*, at the back of his mind that he couldn't describe if he tried.

As soon as his parents go up to their room for the night Mike makes his way to the basement for his nightly ritual.

He grabs the walkie-talkie from the card table where it usually rests. He sits down, cross-legged, inside his blanket fort.

(Inside *her* blanket fort.)

Then he flips the switch on the walkie-talkie to the *on* position. And he waits.

"Can you hear me, El?" he murmurs into the receiver. Just like he's done every night of the past four hundred and seventy-three. "Are you there?"

The static that plays back sounds different, he thinks, when she's here. It skips, and it pops, just a little bit more than it usually does on the nights she's out there, somewhere, trying to reach him.

When he tries to find her tonight, at first all he hears in return is blank white noise. But a few moments later Mike feels something fluttering at the back of his consciousness, and then he hears an unmistakable *skip-skip-pop-pop-pop* from the walkie-talkie he's pretty sure he'd recognize just about anywhere.

He breaks into a broad grin.

"Hi, El," he says, still smiling. "How are you? I... I really miss you."

(He thinks – or, at least, he hopes – that she misses him, too.)

iii.

September 7, 1985

El wears her hair in two short braids the day she starts school with them at Hawkins Senior High School. It's the longest Mike has ever seen it, and he can't take his eyes off her as she walks slowly to the front of the room.

"I'm Jane Hopper," she tells their homeroom class of twenty-nine bored ninth graders. Her hands are clasped behind her back and her eyes are fixed firmly on her new shoes. "I moved here from Indianapolis to live with my uncle."

This was the lie they agreed to stick to when they met last week in the Byers' kitchen to discuss how this was going to work. If El said she came from someplace too far away, too exotic – from California, for example – her arrival in Hawkins would draw far too much attention. On the other hand, if she said she was from someplace nearby, people would wonder why they'd never seen her around before.

Indianapolis, they'd decided, was perfect. It's far from Hawkins but not *too* far. And everyone agrees that the less interest El attracts in this small, sleepy town the safer it'll be for everyone.

"I need to go to room 114 now," she tells Mike when the bell rings at the end of class. She's got a pink Jordache backpack slung over one shoulder and she's standing less than a foot away from him. "I don't know where room 114 is."

Mike smiles at her. He tries to ignore the pounding of his heart and how being so close to her after spending so many months apart makes his stomach flip. "Follow me," he tells her, trying to portray a confidence he doesn't really feel. He considers taking her hand – almost does take her hand – but chickens out at the last second. He rubs at the back of his neck instead. "I'll take you there."

She smiles back at him – and then she wordlessly takes his free hand in hers. Like it's the easiest thing in the world. He marvels at how brave she is, at how small her hand is, and how effortless it is to twine his fingers with hers now that she's here.

"Thank you, Mike," she tells him, her pretty brown eyes never leaving his face. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," he says, wondering if he'll ever be able to stop smiling.

iv.

October 19, 1985

They're huddled together in the high school gymnasium when everything changes.

"Do you feel that?" Will asks quietly, his voice shaking. His pale cheeks are stained with the tracks of his silent tears. "Or is it... is it just me?"

Every other time the creatures from the upside down pushed their way into Hawkins Will was at the center of the storm. He's never experienced it from this perspective before.

Tonight, Will is just an innocent bystander. A regular kid, watching from the outside as the entire world gets ripped apart. Just like the rest of them.

Mike's heart clenches a little to see his friend now, looking so small and terrified as he doubts whether his own senses can be trusted.

But Will's not imagining this. Mike definitely feels it, too.

Or at least, he thinks he does. "Yeah. I can feel it," he says, trying to sound reassuring instead of terrified. He runs a hand through his wrecked hair and closes his eyes, trying to find the right words. "I feel this sort of... electrical charge all over my body followed by... followed by a weird feeling of nothingness. It's been happening over and over ever since... um. Ever since El went back to the Upside Down."

Will's body relaxes a little at his words. "Yeah," he says, nodding. He lets out a long, slow breath. "Yeah. That's it exactly."

They've been hiding in this stupid gym for hours now, waiting for the hellscape that's opened up all around them to finally, finally recede into the shadows and leave their town in peace. Earlier tonight, Steve

told them in no uncertain terms that they were not to leave this gym for anything or *anyone* until one of the adults came back and gave them the all clear.

But El is out there right now, fighting the demogorgons and their shadow monster master all on her own. Staying here, staying hidden, and being completely powerless to do anything to help her, is one of the hardest things Mike has ever done.

"She'll come back," Joyce murmurs into his ear, as though she can read his unspoken thoughts. Her eyes are bloodshot and rimmed with red, but she meets Mike's gaze with a ferocity and a steely determination he never would have dreamed possible from her just a few years ago. "I know she will."

She grabs his hand and gives it a gentle squeeze.

Mike wishes he could be so hopeful.

"I know," he says. It's a lie, but he wishes it were the truth. "Thank you."

Joyce gathers him up in her arms and he clings to her, fighting back tears.

By the time El finally does it – seals up the gate for good, saving the world – Mike is fast asleep on the gym floor, dreaming of her.

i.

December 17, 1985

In hindsight, Mike decides it's actually kind of funny how excited he'd been for tonight's winter dance.

It's funny, because as soon as he and El got to the Hawkins High gym, decorated beyond recognition with crepe paper and tacky green and red balloons, he realized all he *really* wanted to do was turn around, take El home, and give her a goodnight kiss.

And now here they are, twenty minutes after the end of the dance,

standing very close together on El's front porch. The moonlight reflects hopefully in her eyes as she watches him.

Mike has been through a lot of scary stuff these past few years, but he doesn't think he's ever been more terrified than he is right now.

"Um. Your, uh. Your kitchen light is on," he stammers. Mostly because he doesn't know what else to say. His voice is shaking really badly and he cringes, hating how nerdy he must seem right now. "I think Hopper is waiting up for you or... or something."

He glances at El's face again and sees none of the anxiety currently gouging a hole in the pit of his stomach reflected there. She looks amused, a little bemused – and expectant.

"He is," she confirms simply. "He said he'd wait up."

Mike swallows. "Oh."

He closes his eyes, and tries to screw up some of the courage he'd somehow found last year at the Snow Ball when he kissed her. But this time his sister is waiting for him in the driveway, her car engine still running, and Hopper is waiting for El inside, most likely with a bunch of loaded guns at the ready.

The situation this year is entirely different. Mike is pretty sure he's less than a minute away from dying from nervousness.

But just when he's about to give up – to turn on his heels and say good night like the coward he is – El takes charge. She slides her arms up and around his neck, and then she kisses him, just like that, letting her eyes drift shut as she sighs, quietly, against his lips.

Mike doesn't really know what to do. Their last kiss has played on a constant loop in his daydreams this whole past year, but that kiss ended almost before it began. The only thing Mike does know is that this, right here, is the best thing that's ever happened to him, and he's desperate not to mess it up.

On instinct, he wraps his arms around her slender body. She seems to like that, and his heart feels about to beat out of his chest as he pulls her closer, tries his best to kiss her back, and hopes against hope that,

somehow, this perfect moment will never end.

Eventually, though – and far too soon – El pulls away. She's giggling a little, breathless, as she rests her forehead against his.

"Good night, Mike," she says quietly after a very long moment. Her words are little puffs of air against his lips. She moves to hug him, and her warm breath against his cheek feels like drowning and like heaven all at once.

"Um, yeah," Mike mumbles stupidly when she turns to go inside. He's stunned. Reeling. "Good... good night, El."

But before leaving him for the night she leans forward one last time and presses another gentle kiss to his cheek.

"I'll see you Monday," she says, smiling.

Mike decides, in that moment, that 1986 is gonna be a really great year.